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THE
PREY OF THE TERRIBLE
DELIVERED.





The Prey of the Terrible Delivered.

"THUS SAITH THE LORD, EVEN THE CAPTIVES OF THE MIGHTY
SHALL BE TAKEN AWAY, AND THE PREY OF THE TERRIBLE SHALL
BE DELIVERED : FOR I WILL CONTEND WITH HIM THAT CONTENDETH
WITH THEE, AND I WILL SAVE THY CHILDREN."—*Isaiah* xlix, 25.

THE
PREY OF THE TERRIBLE
DELIVERED :

Sermons

PREACHED TO A COUNTRY CONGREGATION,

BY

W. I. LOW, M.A.

INCUMBENT OF ST. JAMES'S, CRUDEN, ABERDEEN.

Published by Request.



ABERDEEN : JOHN ADAM.

EDINBURGH : J. MENZIES & CO. LONDON : SIMPKIN & CO.

1875.

100. w. 468.

ABERDEEN:
PRINTED BY DAVIDSON AND SMITH.

Dedicated

To the

Congregation of St. James's, Cruden,

By

Their Affectionate Pastor.

NOTE.

These Sermons were written and preached in the ordinary course of duty, without a thought of the press. They are now published to gratify a wish expressed among those who heard them.

TO ALL THY PEOPLE, O HEAVENLY FATHER, GIVE THY HEAVENLY GRACE; THAT WITH MEEK HEART AND DUE REVERENCE THEY MAY HEAR AND RECEIVE THY HOLY WORD, TRULY SERVING THEE IN HOLINESS AND RIGHTEOUSNESS ALL THE DAYS OF THEIR LIFE, THROUGH JESUS CHRIST OUR LORD.—AMEN.

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The Prey of the Terrible Delivered.

SERMON I.

The Consequences of Sin.—Unrest.

And they have no rest day nor night, who worship the beast and his image, and whosoever receiveth the mark of his name.—Revelation xiv., 11.

THE general subject to which we are taught now to turn our thoughts, is the coming of the Saviour of mankind. We think of the beginning of His great redeeming work, and we are again to follow Him in our meditations from Bethlehem to Mount Calvary, and from Calvary to the mount of Ascension. And we shall then contemplate Him before the mercy seat on high, pleading the merits of His Cross and passion; praying the Father, by the tender remembrance of His willing self-sacrifice, to pardon and accept those for whom He poured out His precious blood.

We turn our thoughts to the great rescue which God provided for our miserable race.

We do not look on one man becoming a willing substitute, in the enduring of punishment, for others.' We look upon God Himself being manifest in the flesh for that purpose. It is God who conceives, in His loving mind, the plan of redemption. It is God who resolves on this great act of self-sacrifice. It is God Himself, the fountain and sum of all greatness and perfection, who determines upon this great voluntary self-humiliation, for the sake of a creature who is as much the compendium of all imperfection, as He Himself is of all greatness. The eternal stoops so low for a creature who had spurned and abused His gifts ; who had degraded himself in mind and body ; filled his breast with evil passions, and nursed and fed them till they became hideous in their brutal violence and deformity ; whose favourite feelings are the passions of revenge, hatred, malice, spite ; whose actions are full of deceit and hypocrisy ; who turns away with contempt from the teaching and the practice of virtue and goodness, and eagerly follows every evil work.

God looks upon men ; He pities them with a tenderness which they can but imperfectly understand. His ineffable love yearns for

them—desires to redeem them from their misery. How great His condescension ! How adorable His love and compassion ! How grand and magnificent the plan of redemption,—worthy of the all-perfect mind !

To this subject our thoughts are now to be turned. It is the most important of all subjects for human beings. It is a subject which comes near to the heart of every one. No heir of the sinfulness of Adam can put it aside as a thing which does not concern him. “Thou shalt surely die” was denounced on the whole race. The sword of divine justice hangs suspended by a thread over every individual head. And no human mind can conceive the woe of the soul on whom it falls. To every soul then here present, it is a matter of the deepest concern. It is a matter of life and death,—even of eternal life and eternal death. For on our individual recognition and acceptance of the redemption which Christ offers, depends our life, our soul, our everything. Upon this depends our happiness now. Upon this depends the question whether we shall triumph over the trials, the sorrows, the temptations of this life, or whether we shall sink under them, leading lives of

wretchedness, and dying in misery. Upon this depends the question whether we shall progress in holiness, becoming more and more like unto Christ, till we come to the perfect man, to the measure of the stature of His fulness, and being purified and perfected at last, reign with Him in happiness inconceivable ; or whether we shall progress in the other direction, daily becoming more and more debased, depraved, corrupted, till at last from the unprofitable servant is taken even that which he hath, and amid the weeping and gnashing of teeth in outer darkness, he suffers an eternal agony of remorse. And when all this depends on the due recognition of Christ's coming to redeem, surely it cannot but seem to all minds a most important subject. Nay, it is the most important of all subjects. Every time that it is brought before our minds afresh, it is a new offer of salvation and life. Every year therefore, at least, men are called upon in our churches to make or ratify the great choice. "I call heaven and earth to record this day against you" says the scripture, "that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing ; therefore choose life, that both thou and thy seed may live." How do we receive such an offer ?

How *should* we receive it ? How does the condemned criminal receive the offer of pardon and release ? How did the slave in Israel look on the year of jubilee, when he was once more free ? Do such persons receive such messages as these with unconcern ? Do they hesitate to accept them ? Are they dull and slow to comprehend them ? Were they to be so, would they not be set down as lunatics, with minds deranged, or idiots, with no minds at all ? If, therefore, we have every year the offer of salvation renewed by our minds being anew directed to the Saviour's coming, can we be other than thankful ? Even if we think that we have accepted the offer long ago, and made the great choice ;—even if we think we have yielded ourselves to Him who is “our rock and our fortress,”—still it is a blessing. We are called upon again to look at the foundations. The sentinel is sent to see that all is safe at all points. It is this which we are called upon to do now. We are called upon to put it to ourselves :—“ Christ is come as the Saviour of men from sin and death. He has redeemed them. He offers pardon and life to them who will repent and believe in Him. How do I stand affected to His coming ? Have

I considered and accepted His offer of pardon and life ? Do I repent and believe in Him ? Do I think of His coming with joy, or do I treat it with unconcern, and make light of it ?

These are most important questions, and it behoves each individual soul to see at once how he must answer them. How great a blessing it would be, if when Christmas comes, and the angelic announcement is made, "To you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour which is Christ the Lord," each individual among us could realise Him as *his* Saviour, *his* Deliverer, in whom he receives that in which he recites his belief in the Creed—"the forgiveness of sins and the life everlasting !"

And if our hearts do not warm with a glow of gratitude, what is the cause ? It must be that we do not properly appreciate the gift of a Saviour, because we do not properly feel the need for Him. We do not properly appreciate the guilt of sin in the eyes of God : we do not see the exceeding misery of the condition of sin now, and the unspeakable anguish it leads to hereafter.

We shall therefore be doing wisely, to turn our thoughts till Christmas to the fearful con-

dition of the soul that yields itself to sin, that we may see clearly how miserable we should be without a Saviour. And then we shall be ready to receive the announcement of that Saviour's coming, and the offer of Salvation through Him, with proper joy and gratitude.

Let us look then at some of the effects of sin. When a man commits a crime, he finds that at once he has brought upon himself a fearful UNREST ; which dogs his footsteps wherever he goes ; alarms his mind at every turn ; poisons every attempt at enjoyment ; startles him in the midst even of his sleep ; takes the sunshine and happiness out of his whole life. As the angel says in the text : " They have no rest day nor night who worship the beast and his image, and whosoever receiveth the mark of his name." These words are primarily applicable to the final punishment of the wicked. But they are true also of the wicked on this side of the grave. For their whole existence is one continued progress ; and their state in the world to come is the natural completion of the process through which they have been passing here. It is the end towards which they have been continually tending. It is with them as it is with


the good. They who make the choice in favour of that which is good, are also continually progressing. They are going through the process of sanctification. They are "growing in grace." They are "growing up unto Christ in all things." They have received the talent of God's grace, and like the faithful servants they use it; and what happens at the last is, that this process is completed. They that have, to them is given. They are finally perfected, and admitted to the place where no unholy thing enters.

And so with the wicked. Day by day they too progress, but it is a downward progress. Men do not become abandoned sinners in a day. They first cherish the evil thought, but do not as yet dare to commit the action. But ere long, by brooding over the forbidden action, they have fed their desires to such an extent that they become too strong for all prudence, and the action is committed. And this is but the beginning. One after another, all restraints are thrown off. One after another the remnants of a better nature disappear. And this process of deterioration goes on; and what happens at last is what happened to the unprofitable servant. What he had was taken from him. So the

remnants of good disappear ; and the process through which the wicked are passing all their lives is completed, and they become fit companions for devils. And thus in whatever light we view it, the state of the wicked after death is but the culmination of the process through which they have been passing during life.

And so if their state in the place of punishment is one of unrest beyond our present powers to comprehend, it is but an intensified form of the unrest which they suffer here. For as soon as sin is wilfully committed, this unrest begins. The uneasiness of shame invades and almost paralyses the mind. Look at our first parents. As soon as they had committed the first sin, their eyes were opened on that which they had not before known—the sense of guilt. They were ashamed. They strove in their uneasiness to hide themselves from the presence of God. Their happiness was gone at once. Or look at Cain, filled with shame and dread, a fugitive and a vagabond on the face of the earth. For not only shame, but fear follows sin. Our first parents were afraid of the presence of the pure and holy God. Cain was afraid, least any one meeting him should look on him as an enemy

of the human race, and slay him. Jacob was filled with terror when he heard of his brother coming to meet him,—the brother whom he had deceived and wronged. It is the same now. The murderer has no rest. Even in solitude, he starts at every sound. The sound of his own footsteps alarms him, for it seems to him like the footfall of justice at his heels. Even in his sleep he cannot rest. The face of his victim looks up at him all ghastly in his dreams, and he starts out of his sleep, as if he felt the hand of the pursuer on his shoulder. And even when his crime is not as yet discovered, he is in constant terror for fear of detection. He becomes perfectly helpless. Look at David after the murder of Uriah. Before his great sin, he was more than a match for the fierce and haughty Joab. He compelled that lawless soldier to march behind Abner's bier as a mourner, while he himself composed a lament for the assassinated general ; but look at him after. Joab knew his guilty secret. That fatal letter which directed Uriah to be placed in the forefront of the battle, and then left unsupported that he might fall, sold the king's liberty. Henceforth Joab lacerates his tenderest feelings, violates his most



solemn commands, orders him about like a servant. The king is helpless ; he dare not resist. All rest is taken out of his life. And so it is with every sinner. The Devil never fails to follow up his victories. One fall is followed by redoubled temptations. The first sin does not long stand alone. The jeers of companions goad the sinner on. His shame and fear have struck the manliness out of him, and he dare not resist. The toils thicken round him, and he becomes more and more terrified, more and more a stranger to rest. For the course is ever downwards, and so long as he clings to his sins, their consequences cling to him. He thinks, perhaps, he will flee from the things which remind him of his sins ; but the remembrance of them sticks to him. Men flee beyond the ocean. They put thousands of miles between them and the scenes of their crimes ; but still unrest, and the remembrance of sin pursue. Nowhere is any escape found, till, wearied with half a lifetime of unrest, and ineffectual struggle to escape, the criminal is tired of life, and is driven to confess. For the dread of the judgment of God will not be put out of the mind. Even if the sinner is able for a time to keep it out of the mind with the

thoughts of other things, the hour comes, when, stretched on the bed of sickness, he feels himself in the grasp of One who is the rewarder of men according to their works, and he is accordingly filled with terror and despair. He cannot rest. He verifies the powerful words in the book of Job:—"The wicked man travaileth with pain all his days. . . . A dreadful sound is in his ears; in prosperity the destroyer shall come upon him. He believeth not that he shall return out of darkness, and he is waited for of the sword. He wandereth abroad for bread saying where is it? He knoweth that the day of darkness is ready at his hand. Trouble and anguish shall make him afraid; they shall prevail against him, as a king ready to the battle."

Thus does unrest,—ceaseless unrest,—pursue the sinner through his life. It takes all happiness and peace out of it. The very Lord's day, which should be the day of rest, is to him the most restless of all. He cannot endure the sacred calmness of that day. For then "a dreadful sound is in his ears," more dreadful than the din of worldly occupations. But he may be obstinate. He may think he will not submit. He will flee

from the thought of judgment to come. At times, like Felix, he may tremble as the thought of it shoots across his mind. But like him, he will put off such thoughts till a more convenient season. He will hide himself from the thought for a while yet. And so, like the hare before the greyhound, he doubles and doubles, panting and weary, but he cannot escape. His sin runs him down at last. And who can describe the anguish, the despair of the hour when it does so ? His life is perhaps near its end. The life of unrest is nearly done. But rest is further off than ever. Day and night, in life and in death, for the wicked there is no rest. Accusing memories in hideous array crowd in on the mind, with fearful and threatening aspect. Fain would he take refuge behind sophistical excuses, but they cannot bear a look ; his own reason shivers them to pieces. His conscience rises up and upbraids him for the violence he has done to it, and the neglect he has heaped on his best friend. Remorse seizes upon him. His mind is racked and tortured more than his body is by the mortal sickness. Enfeebled by disease and pain, his reason sometimes wavers. The imagination pictures the enemy of souls hovering

over him claiming his own. Terror and anguish so overwhelm his mind that he cannot think to any good purpose. He has had his opportunity, and he has flung it away. The door is now shut. Too late ! What fearful unrest ! Truly does the text speak when it says, "They have no rest day nor night, who worship the beast and his image, and whosoever receiveth the mark of his name."

How fearful would be the consequences of sin, even if this were all, and it were nothing more than unrest in this life. How much more awful, when this fearful unrest is but a faint foretaste of which is to come ! And that this is the case, the Scripture is full of proofs. It uses many similes to express it, because only by ideas taken from bodily anguish can we receive ideas of spiritual pain. It is compared to a worm that dieth not, giving the sinner no rest ; as in the ancient legend concerning him who was chained to a rock, while the bird of prey was continually tearing at his vitals, and yet he could not die,—could not cease to feel. It is compared to the excruciating pain and unrest of the fire that is not quenched, in the lake of brimstone, which sticks blazing to the

skin, and suffocates with its fumes, while yet consciousness cannot come to an end. And the soul can only, like the rich man in the parable, utter the hopeless cry, that one would dip the tip of his finger in water and cool the tongue. All these comparisons are forcible enough. They give us an idea of the unrest of the lost sinner, which is simply frightful. And yet they fail to come up to what the reality will be. For if "eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, nor heart of man conceived," the goodness of the things which God hath laid up for them that fear Him, it must be equally impossible for our minds in this mortal state, to conceive the unutterable depth of the woe of the lost.

Which of us, fellow-sinners, does not tremble at the thought? We know that we are sinners. We know that the greater part of our lives has been transacted in forgetfulness of God. We have taken our resolutions, and carried them out, without a thought of Him. How few are the things which we have done with the distinct view of glorifying Him! How seldom do we strive after actions that will please Him, compared with the frequency with which we search for means of pleasing ourselves! How often do

we neglect the duty which we know ought to be done, for the sake of the indulgence of self. How vast a crowd of unworthy and sinful thoughts have passed through our minds, pleasant to our fallen hearts, but most offensive to the mind of God; and been clean forgotten by us, but all recorded in the book of God's remembrance! What wretches should we appear if even all that we do know about ourselves were laid bare at this moment before the congregation! What shame and confusion would cover us! And yet they are all awaiting the day when, if they are not washed away in the blood of the Lamb of God, they will be laid bare before the universal human race. How miserable! What sinners we are! And the blood-hound of *unrest* is on our track, and we may try, if we choose, to escape; but we cannot. So long as our sin clings to us unwashed away, so long will *unrest* pursue.

What a fearful thing then, brethren, is sin! How fearful its consequences! How unutterable the mercy of the gift of One to put away all the guilt, and shield the sinner with His Almighty arm! In shame, fear, helplessness, sickness, "in all time of our tribulation," and

“in the hour of death,” how deeply, thankfully, is this felt! It is God Himself who takes human flesh to deliver. He is able. And He looks upon us toiling in the meshes of sin; He sees your troubles, your temptations, your unrest because of sin, and He sees mine. And He says “Come unto Me all ye that labour and are heavy laden and I will give you rest.” How wide and broad is the invitation! “All ye that labour, and are heavy laden.” How simple are the conditions! “Come unto Me.” And what is it to come unto Him? If we come to Him we must forsake and leave behind us the love of sin. We must repent, and bring forth fruits worthy of repentance. We must believe in Him;—not only believe that He exists, and that He died for the sins of men;—but trust in Him as *our* Saviour, *our* Deliverer, who offers to every individual straying from His fold,—every prodigal far from his home,—pardon and restoration, if he will but come back.

Does not the heart melt before the thought of the fearful guilt and woe of sinful man, and the pity and adorable love of the Saviour? Do we not seem now to see His value to our souls? Let us, then, never forget our own guilt, and the

fearful consequences of sin, in present and eternal *unrest* and woe, and we shall value more as we ought, the great gift of a Redeemer which we now call to mind.

SERMON II.

The Consequences of Sin—Corruption.

Why should ye be stricken any more? ye will revolt more and more; the whole head is sick, and the whole heart faint. From the sole of the foot even unto the head there is no soundness in it, but wounds, and bruises, and putrefying sores.—Isaiah i., 5. 6.

ON Sunday last we endeavoured to discover the reason why men often hear with so little interest and gratitude the story of the coming of a Saviour from sin and its many miserable consequences. We came to the conclusion that a great deal of this carelessness arises from the fact, that men have a very inadequate sense of the guilt of sin. They think little of its consequences; they do not realize the misery which it entails upon themselves and the world at large. They are like men lying asleep on the rails, with certain destruction coming down upon them, but not aware of it. And so long

as they are not aware of the danger of their position, they cannot be sensible of the mercy of rescue. We saw that upon our individual recognition of the redeeming work of Christ, and our acceptance by faith in Him of His gift of pardon and deliverance, our own escape depends. We recognized the fact that the placing before our thoughts every year of the coming of the Saviour, was equivalent to a renewal every year of the offer of the pardon and peace bought by His blood: that it was a new call to make the great choice whether we will live or die. And we concluded that in order to be able to receive with proper feelings the proclamation at Christmas of the Saviour's having come, we must prepare ourselves by cultivating a just sense of the position in which we should be without a Saviour. We must realize the consequences of sin, so that we may desire to be delivered from them, and may accept the deliverance when it is offered.

We strove to make a beginning in doing this, by looking at the change which indulgence in sin of any sort produces in a man's feelings. We saw that his state became one of ceaseless unrest: that the sinner lived a life of constant

uneasiness, of constant struggle to escape from that uneasiness, and of continued failure to do so : that instead of rest being found, so long as sin is wilfully indulged in, the unrest becomes greater and greater, till it culminates in a deathbed of despair, and the misery, weeping and gnashing of teeth, of eternal loss.

The text places before us another aspect of the matter. It shows us the consequences of sin from another point of view ; and from that point they appear under an aspect which may be described by the one word CORRUPTION. "The whole head is sick, and the whole heart faint. From the sole of the foot even unto the head there is no soundness in it, but wounds, and bruises, and putrefying sores." The condition of a man whose spiritual nature is undergoing the effects of indulgence in sin, is like that of a body in which mortification has set in ; this spiritual mortification gradually extending its sphere, till the man's spiritual nature is a mass of corruption. And if this is true of individuals, it is true of the race of man at large. The spiritual corruption spreads gradually ; sometimes slowly, sometimes rapidly, but always with increased rapidity the longer

it remains unchecked, and always with less and less hope of remedy.

The Prophet makes this comparison in order to aid our realization of the vast evils which follow from sin. It is a comparison taken from bodily things, to enable us to conceive the effect of sin upon the human spirit.

Let us look at the comparison, and endeavour to comprehend its teaching. What is the effect of corruption upon material bodies? Flesh and sinew seem to dissolve. The parts no longer cohere, or support and sustain each other. The whole is gradually disintegrated. There is no longer the strength of health, but utter powerlessness. The rotting tree becomes utterly weak. It is degraded from the glory of its former position. It is no longer the thing of beauty and majesty which it was before, but gaunt, bare, unsightly. And this is still more the case with the animated body, which has become the prey of corruption. Its beauty is gone. It becomes offensive in its gradual decay. It becomes the cause of disease and pestilence to others. And when corruption has seized on a body yet alive, the capacities which accompany life are gradually lost. Sensation ceases. Power

is changed into prostration, and the affected part becomes incapable even of moving itself. Those powers and capacities, in the exercise of which was found the keenest enjoyment, are all gone ; and these gone, enjoyment is gone with them. And when this process is completed, death is come. Such is the destructive, the loathsome, work of corruption.

Can it be then that sin produces such effects as these upon the spirit of man. Can it be that that noble endowment of man's nature,—that wherein is to be found the principal feature of the image of God in him,—can be reduced by sin to this helpless, degraded, loathsome condition ? We can scarcely be surprised if this be the case, for sin produces these effects even in men's bodies. “Go into any hospital in any great town, and look at the miserable spectres that present themselves there to your eyes—the walking corpses that many amongst them appear ; look at the beds as they are arranged side by side, and the weary and wan sufferers that toss upon them, and inquire their history. How many will be found to have brought themselves thus low by their sins ; how many will be now found to be eating the bitter fruits of their

own devices ; or if not suffering for their sins in their own persons, paying perhaps fine for the sins of their forefathers, which tarried till the third or fourth generation come, and has then been levied by God ; that still the picture presented will on the wall be 'disease and corruption' the successors sin. So it was with David : disease was a part of the punishment he had drawn upon himself. 'My wounds,' says he 'stink and are corrupted through my foolishness. I am brought into great misery. My loins are filled with a sore disease and there is no whole part in my body. I am feeble and sore smitten, I have roared for very disquietness of my heart.' What a contrast does this scene offer to that of David's days of innocence, when sound in limb, high in spirit he could go forth a youth, rugged and of a fair countenance, against the Goliath Philistine ; or laugh at his pursuers, his nimble as harts' feet, as he traversed the mountains of Judah with God for his guard. Then his heart panted not as now ; then strength failed him not ; then the sight of death's eyes went not from him."*

*Professor J. J. Blunt.

And if sin works corruption even in the body, need we be surprised if it does the same in the soul? And see how mercilessly it does so. When sin begins, a dissolution commences in man's spiritual nature more disastrous than the corruption of the body. The whole nature is disorganised. The passions, like a headlong torrent, carry the man now one way, now another. For they are all set at variance. The love of wealth drags one way, and the desire to gratify the appetites another. They are full of cross-currents, but they all tend in the direction of evil; while conscience and reason raise their protest against these debased inclinations. Thus the manifold passions, the conscience, the reason, the fears, the desires, are all divided against each other. The nature appears to be disintegrated. There is no longer the noble and strong consistency and unity of purpose, which comes of the harmony and union of all the powers and capacities under the guidance of that holiness which was characteristic of man as he came from the hand of his Maker. Man becomes full of inconsistency, being moved now in one direction, now in another, according as now one passion, now another is strongest. And even

when there is apparent consistency, it turns out to be produced by one passion, which has become so strong as to master completely all the rest. And then it eats into the man's nature and corrodes it, till it is as completely debased and corrupted, as if it had been dissolved by the counter action of fifty equally indulged passions. The miser's single passion as effectually destroys him, as the indulgence of a number of passions in turn destroys the weak and inconsistent man. Thus the sinner's nature is disorganized, and the one part acts against and eats up the other. St. Paul describes this result vividly in his epistle to the Romans,—“That which I do I allow not ; for what I would, that do I not, but what I hate that do I. . . . The good that I would I do not, but the evil that I would not, that I do. . . . I see a law in my members warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin, which is in my members.”

And as the natural consequence of this disorganization, there follows the utter enfeeblement of the man. It is this consequence of original sin which makes us from the first so easily seduced from the paths of uprightness.

But when a man knowingly yields to sin, and commits it by his own conscious act, the enfeeblement becomes worse and worse. It is this which is the cause of the apparent inability of so many to resist the ordinary temptations of their daily lives. There is some special sin which they will not put away from them, but to which they cling in spite of every warning. This strikes all power out of them. They perhaps put away with hurried energy many other sins, and try to persuade themselves that they are now entitled to the favour of God. But they cannot. And they wonder at their feebleness to resist sin. But they need not wonder at this. For so' long as they cling to, and make excuses for, their special favourite sin, they feel in their inmost hearts that to make a show of serving God in other points, is a sham and hypocrisy. And while they feel this, how can they resist temptation? Thus their nature is laid open to the enemy to be over-run by him at his will. Ere long they cease even to attempt to resist. And from this they pass on to have an actual love for evil. Then they find pleasure in wounding the religious feelings of others, and in expressing in

a noisy and violent way their contempt for such feelings. All good feeling disappears from their conduct and their nature ; they are degraded, and utterly brutalized. And to weak persons who have not had their nature strengthened by the reception of God's teaching and His Spirit, the sinner then becomes as dangerous as the pestilential exhalations from a putrid carcase are to the body. And when a man's nature is come to this, and every good feeling, every good desire is poisoned and corrupted, he is as loathsome and offensive a sight to the living conscience, as a putrefying carcase is to the bodily eye. It excites a feeling which is a mixture of indignation and pity :—indignation at the sin, pity for the sinner. It is a most miserable sight to see this corrupting process going on. And it is a merciless process ;—as merciless to the spiritual nature, as consumption is to the body. And when mortification has set in in a man's body, or creeping paralysis laid hold of it, it gradually loses all the powers and capacities that accompany and show forth the existence of life ; and such is the effect also of sin upon the spirit. Its powers are gradually lost. It ceases to be able to perceive the things

that be of God. The spiritual intelligence becomes dull and sluggish. The spirit ceases to be capable of enjoyment; the man ceases to have any enjoyments but those of the body, and the animal nature. The spiritual part has none. And then when the process is completed, and when the spirit has lost all sensation,—all power to feel heavenly enjoyment,—then has ensued spiritual death. The spirit continues to exist but in a dead, a corrupt condition. And with the spiritual life has gone also happiness. As the period of greatest enjoyment is when all the capacities of mind and body are in their greatest perfection, so it is with the spirit. And the period, on the other hand of the greatest woe, is when all the faculties of the spirit are corrupted and lost. Thus the state of corruption is a state of misery. And such is the state of sin, the consequence of separation in will and act from Him who is life and all perfection. It is thus that Job represents the matter in the Old Testament. When God is driven by man's sin to hold him for an enemy, then, he says, "He as a rotten thing consumeth, as a garment that is moth-eaten." It is thus that it appears to St. Paul in the New Testa-

ment, "The old man," he says, "is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts." And the cultivated conscience and spirit of the Apostle feels keenly the presence of this corrupting influence. He feels it like a dead and putrefying body joined to him, and which he carries about everywhere. "O wretched man that I am," he exclaims, "Who shall deliver me from the body of this death?" Thus does sin produce as its infallible consequence, the most complete, the most loathsome corruption. And this is a sufficiently horrible spectacle, and a spectacle which, alas! is far from rare. How far from uncommon is it to see men with every noble and tender feeling poisoned, with every good capacity enfeebled, extirpated, corrupted; glorying in the uproarious violation of every decency, every good feeling; appearing to rejoice with Satanic delight in everything disgusting to thought, everything foul in language, and everything debased and brutal in action?

This is a spectacle indeed which is horrible enough. But looking at it in individual examples gives no sufficient idea of the frightful contagiousness of this corruption. When we look at the way in which it spreads in a community, we

begin to have a more adequate idea of the vast proportions of the evil. For no bodily disease, even the most loathsome, is so infectious as the moral and spiritual disease which comes of sin. It spreads more rapidly, more fatally, than the most virulent pestilence ; and to the Christian's eye the spectacle is more awful than the swift approach of the prairie fire is to the traveller ; for it brings more terrible dangers, and leaves more awful desolation behind.

For a mere look will set the evil thought a-working, which contains within it disaster and ruin to the soul. That fatal taint comes in our nature. As bodily diseases are inherited and pass from father to son, because the son possesses to a greater or less extent the father's nature, so the nature of our first father, Adam, with the corruption which sin introduced into it, has descended to us. The sin of the father is visited on the children, and will be to the latest generation. But it propagates its virus in other ways also. Christ continually warns us of this fatal characteristic of it. He compares it to leaven, which gradually permeates with its influence the whole of that with which it is in contact. And here the prophet compares it in the text to a


spreading, putrefying sore. And in another place we read that "evil men and seducers wax worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived." It needs no description to tell you how it happens. You have seen again and again how it spreads in an individual. You have seen how the once pure mind was gradually accustomed to impure thoughts; how such thoughts became the delight of the corrupted heart, till all shame and conscience appeared to be lost, and they were perfected in the foul language, and unclean action. And you often see how it spreads not only in the individual, but in the family and in the district. It begins to take root in the nature of the young, from their very infancy. In even the mother's treatment of her child, how often is deceit and falsehood resorted to to obtain a temporary purpose, and thus even enjoyment is found in instructing the innocent young mind in that untruthfulness, which is the parent of infinite evil. See again how as its young intelligence opens, it hears the unclean jest about that which ought not to be once named among Christians; and as soon as it is able to comprehend, its mind is polluted and so far debased. The countenance falls: it assumes the look of

premature knowledge which effectually takes away the innocent, happy, guileless look of childhood. And so the seed of the foul contagion is planted in soil which is by nature only too congenial. And it at once begins to do its work. There is little enough ever presented to it to correct the evil, and disinfect the surrounding atmosphere of sin. There is perhaps, indeed probably, no regular reading as a duty and a delight of God's holy and purifying Word. There is no regular assembly of the family, morning and evening, at the great heavenly Father's knee, in family prayer. Little enough attention is paid to the teaching of the child its own private duty of prayer, or to teaching it the things concerning God and his relation to men. And so it grows up till the time comes when it leaves home. And then just when girlhood is developing into womanhood, and boyhood into manhood, the young soul is plunged into an atmosphere which in far too many cases is seething with the contagion of every kind of vice. Blasphemy, drunkenness, lewdness, are, it may be, the continual, or at least very frequent surroundings. What could possibly be expected of a soul so

trained, in such circumstances ? How many families can tell the miserable results ! How truly is the effect of sin compared to corruption ! How fatally, how rapidly does it spread ! How completely does it corrupt and destroy ! Like the snowball, not so large as the hand, started on the mountain side, little would stop it at first ; but it rolls away more and more swiftly, growing every moment larger and larger, bounding down the slope, now crashing through a forest, and now utterly beyond the power of man to stop, burying a whole village in ruin at the foot. What a fearful thing is even the comparatively small beginning of evil ! How awful the final devastation and corruption ! Not untruly does the prophet say “ Ye will revolt more and more ; the whole head is sick, and the whole heart faint,”—the whole mind is corrupted, and the whole moral strength taken away ; “ From the sole of the foot even unto the head there is no soundness in it, but wounds, and bruises and putrefying sores,”—it is debased, thoroughly corrupt, and corrupting.

The evil is so great, that there seems a strain put upon even the patience of God Himself. “ Why should ye be stricken any more ? ” He

says, as if the correction of the Lord had been tried long enough, and had failed. What a miserable condition would man have been in if God *had* left the race to itself. What a position should we ourselves be in, no better than that of the lowest heathen ! If the general result be so fearful, how proportionately heavy is our own share in the guilt ! For we must not forget how much we have contributed to the spread of this corruption, and how much of the corruption which is being propagated by others, may trace its first origin to ourselves. And the more we look into the corruption of our own thoughts, and aims, and motives, and actions,—the more we look at the way in which by these we have spread the poison, the more shall we be moved to cry out with the Apostle, “O wretched man that I am ! Who shall deliver me from the body of this death ?” Happy will it be for us, if we are thus brought to desire deliverance, to seek escape from the corruption of sin. Then we shall be ready to accept the salvation wrought by Him who alone can save ; and, having been made spiritually whole through Him, shall be made the blessed means of spreading the health of His salvation round about us to the ends of the earth.



S E R M O N I I I .

The Consequences of Sin.—Death.

Sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death.—James i, 15.

WE have already looked at the effect of sin upon the happiness of human beings, even in this life. We have seen that it entails upon the sinner ceaseless unrest, from which there is no escape, but through Jesus Christ. We have considered also its fatal corrupting effect on his nature; observing how it disorganizes and disintegrates that nature like putrefaction in decaying flesh; and how that corruption spreads, as surely as leaven, and as fatally as a pestilence, till it obtains possession of the whole man; spreading at the same time to other individuals, till it threatens the utter corruption of the whole race.

The text places before the mind the consequences of sin, in yet another point of view:—
“Sin when it is finished bringeth forth DEATH.”

These words no doubt cover the mortal

effects of sin in the other world, as well as in this. They not only refer to moral and bodily death here ; but to spiritual death, and death eternal ;—to that endless existence of the human being after the day of judgment, passed in outer darkness, amid weeping and gnashing of teeth ; that endless existence not in a state of stupefaction or sleep, but of the keenest consciousness,—a consciousness, however, which feels nothing but unintermitting anguish.

It will be sufficient however for us to-day, to look at the mortal consequences of sin before and during the supreme hour, when the wrench takes place which severs the soul and spirit from the body, which has been their habitation and their instrument, during the earthly part of the individual's existence.


Let us then take notice at the outset that as man was created by God, he was not subject to death. This was one feature in which he bore the image of his immortal Creator. For the warning ran "*In the day thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die.*" Here death is plainly represented as a thing from which so long as his will remained in harmony with God's, man was to be free. If death was to be a consequence of

disobedience, then so long as he was obedient, he was to be free from it.

It is possible to speculate upon what would have happened, if man *had* been obedient. We may form conjectures how, and by what means, his nature would have been developed and strengthened, till he was secure against temptation. We may try to form theories as to what would have been the effect of the tree of life upon unfallen man, if in God's good time, he had been permitted to taste of it. And we may wonder how that body which was formed out of the dust of the ground, would have been elevated and fitted for the life of the spirit, in the more immediate presence of God. But such speculations would be unprofitable. The one practical point in connection with this is, that as man came upon this world he did not carry in his nature the necessity of death ; but that death was a penal infliction, brought upon him afterwards by his own sin, in accordance with the decree of God's governing justice.

Every time then that a death happens, it is the infliction of a penalty by the hand of God. It is the sword of divine justice that comes down upon the sufferer, because he is a sinner,—

one of a race of sinners,—offenders against the laws of the Creator. It is not to be regarded as a special interposition to meet an isolated case ; but the operation of a universal divine law. For here again is an example of what is universally the case with God's laws ; He has so constituted them that they execute themselves. It is a law of His that intemperance is followed by poverty, disease, and contempt in this life, independent of the consequences in the life to come ; and the result comes to pass not by any special interference, but by what he has made to be the natural and regular consequence of the sin. And so it is with death. It comes as the regular and natural consequence of human sin. In some cases we see plainly the connexion between the man's death, and some glaring sin of which he has been guilty. And this being the case, we cannot refuse to believe the teaching of Scripture, that whether we see the connexion or not, it always exists. "Sin when it is finished, bringeth forth death." And again, "the wages of sin is death." We must not fail to observe in the latter passage, the very great difference between the language used regarding death as connected with sin, and that used



regarding the way in which a man attains to everlasting life. It is distinctly clear that eternal life is not the wages of his righteousness, as death is the wages of sin. Whatever his righteousness had been, even supposing, what is not the case, that he *could* of himself have acted against the tendencies of his nature, and done righteousness,—even then he could have done no more than his duty in the present ; he could not have made up for the past ; he could not have claimed eternal life as wages. After all that he can do has been done, that eternal life is still the gift of God. “The gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.” But observe how differently death is spoken of. It is distinctly “the *wages* of sin,”—the natural and due consequence of man’s revolt against God. We cannot save ourselves, but we *can* destroy ourselves : we cannot be saved without the Saviour, we *can* perish by our own act. What a fearful power, brethren, to possess ! How little do men think of the danger of possessing such a power, and of the care which is consequently demanded of them ! How careful has experience taught them to be with weapons dangerous to the body ! How long

will it be till they learn to be as careful about the most dangerous thing they possess ?

But men in general think little about death ; and surely in such case they cannot be called other than thoughtless. But yet persons who are far from thoughtless in regard to other matters, think little of this. They hear of the deaths of human beings like themselves, and read the column of deaths in the newspapers, with a feeling very little different from that excited by the other pieces of news. They read of the carnage of battles, by which thousands of human beings, of flesh and blood like themselves, with immortal souls like themselves, with the same feelings, the same love of life, the same capacity for pain, die instantaneously with perhaps the last word on their lips an oath, or sink after a longer or shorter period of agonizing pain. They read of such things not only without awe, but without even a feeling of pleasurable excitement. They can speak of the battles in which such things took place with triumphant glee. Surely men who do this can never have seen the death-struggle of a human being, or very different feelings would rise in their minds.

It is plain that God intended death to be the very strongest deterrent to keep man from the sin which "brings it forth." He evidently looked upon it as a thing which men ought to dread. And in harmony with this view, he uses the threat of death, as the most powerful and effective warning against breaking His laws. When therefore men begin to grow callous, or thoughtless, about it, and think as little about this consequence of sin, as they do about the unrest and corruption that come of it, it is plain that it is time to turn the attention specially to it for a while, that the mind may be filled with a sounder estimate of what a dread event it really is.

And when it is duly considered, it will very soon appear as the most awful event in human existence. It will appear thus for what it ends, for what it is, and for what it begins. I am not now about to direct your attention to what Christian faith makes it to the triumphant believer in the Conqueror of death. That view is indeed a happier one, and one on which we naturally love to linger ; seeing a human soul in the hour of dissolution, when all the powers sink prostrate in exhaustion, yet, even in that hour of supreme

weakness, triumphing through the faith of an unconquerable spirit in Him that loved him. I say this is a view on which we love to linger. But when this view is dwelt upon exclusively, men are sometimes prone to forget that it is the faithful Christian alone who can thus triumph in death, and consequently forget to consider whether they have that qualification which alone can smooth their dying pillow. And therefore it is necessary and beneficial to look sometimes at the other side of the picture, and look at death as it is in itself, and at what it is to the sinner, in consequence of sin.

Whatever may be thought, or probably said without thought, by the young, and the thoughtless, in the prime of strength and the vigour of health, mankind universally in the thoughtful moment regards him as the "King of Terrors." They feel that the Psalmist's language exactly expresses their thought:—"My heart is disquieted within me; and the fear of death is fallen upon me. Fearfulness and trembling are come upon me; and an horrible dread hath overwhelmed me." They feel that even its less important surroundings are such as humanity shrinks from with trembling. The tenacity

with which human beings cling to life, is the exact measure of their fear of death. They cling to bare existence. When you look at the rich man, whose life you imagine to be full of enjoyment, you may think he clings to life for its pleasures. Even if you were right in this, which is probably not the case, still he is but a rare instance. Look at the vast multitudes of the poor, who toil and struggle with poverty, sickness, and adversity, from boyhood to old age ; look at the wretched beings searching in the mornings the dust heaps on the streets of our cities. These are not struggling and searching for enjoyments and luxuries : they know that such things are beyond their reach. They are struggling, and probably have struggled all their lives for nothing more than bare existence. Though their life has no pleasures, or at least, so few compared with its miseries that the prevailing complexion is miserable, they cling to it with a desperation evidenced by their exertions.

But independent of this natural clinging to existence,—this fear of death,—men fear death because it involves the parting with all to which their best affections have clung through life.

And the pang which this costs is no mere imagination, but a most poignant reality. Change comes lightly over the young. It is comparatively nothing to them to leave home. Their hearts are full of hope, and love adventure. They look forward to happy homes of their own. But the old man looks back, and it is a greivous wrench to him, to leave that which has been the home of his heart for so many years, every little corner of which is associated in his memory with some tender reminiscence. And the older a man grows, the feeling grows stronger. The nearer he comes to death, the more he dreads the parting. "And so it was that when Lot quitted Sodom, the younger ones went on gladly . . . It was the aged one who looked behind, to the home which had so many recollections connected with it. And therefore it is that when men approach the period of existence when they must go, there is an instinctive lingering over things which they shall never see again. Every time the sun sets, every time the old man sees his children gathering round him, there is a filling of the eye with an emotion that we can understand. There is upon his soul the thought of parting,

that strange wrench from all we love, which makes death (say what moralists will of it) a bitter thing."*

And a man dreads the bitterness of that hour because of its utter loneliness. The spirit must pass alone through that dark passage. Then "the heart knoweth his own bitterness," and "a stranger doth not intermeddle with" his grief. As the *Christian Year* says,

. "All alone, so heaven has willed, we die,
Nor even the tenderest heart and next our own
Knows half the reasons why we smile and sigh."

All these are circumstances connected with what may be called the mere surroundings of death. And yet how much is there in them that men dread! How much is there of human suffering!

But even this is but a trifling fraction of the full misery of that hour. The keenest sword that then pierces through the soul has yet to be considered. It is that of which the text reminds us,—the connexion of sin with death. "Sin when it is finished bringeth forth death." And as St. Paul says, "the sting of death is sin." It is the sense of guilt which is the most over-

*F. W. Robertson.

whelming feeling. It is not merely a *general* feeling that the life has not been what it might have been. It is a far sharper, more definite, feeling than this. Distinct instances of sin and crime rise up before the mind, with all their awful consequences, in which perhaps others than ourselves have been involved, and which we can never repair. They come like the vultures of the east. There, when an animal sinks dying or dead, though none have been seen before, immediately one dark object is seen in the air coming from one quarter, and another from another ; and every moment they come, more and more numerous, till the air is darkened with them ; and they sit in grim silence before their victim's eyes, till it is dead, or so far exhausted that they are safe to attack it, and, so to speak, devour it alive. And so one after another the remembrances of guilty actions crowd in on the dying sinners' mind, coming to rend the heart with fear and remorse. The soul sees these memories arise with the same agony that the dying creature sees the vultures gathering to devour it. The dread of approaching judgment overwhelms the mind : the soul feels utterly helpless and prostrate :

raised from the dead, which relates, that his first utterance when he rose, was to ask anxiously whether he should have to die again, and that when told that he must, he never smiled more ? What is the meaning of this but that in men's belief there is keen suffering connected inseparably with the cessation of the powers of life ? We know that the more the faculties decay, the more miserable does existence become. And it is only carrying the process a step further when we say that with their complete cessation there is keen sorrow and pain.

And the soul of the sinner has had a foretaste of this before. He has felt long before that "sin when it is finished bringeth forth death." He has felt the gradual enfeeblement, it may be extinction, so far as any practical purpose is concerned, of the powers of conscience. He has felt all holy aspirations, all noble feeling, all love for truth and right, and die within him. He has felt himself slowly finding less and less enjoyment in the service of God, and communion with Him : he felt himself becoming less and less able to comprehend and understand heavenly things. He felt the darkening of his life by the cloud

that his sins have drawn between him and the brightness of God's face. And these feelings have been accompanied by an uneasy sense of degradation and fear, which has given him a foretaste of the final suffering which sin when it is finished bringeth forth. And now when his hour is come, he feels that his probation is over, that he has cast away his opportunities, that now there is no help, and his miserable doom is come.

And look at what an awful thing death is when judged not merely by its effect upon the individual who dies, but by its consequences to others connected with him. You see one member of a family, it may be the head, taken, and how often are life-long sorrow, destitution and misery, the inevitable consequences to all the family. Children are left without a guide or protector; there is none to watch over them till they are better able to buffet with the storm of temptation. They fall into the hands of evil companions who care little for their bodies, and nothing at all for their souls. They fall into the ways of sin. Moral and spiritual death ensues, and when bodily death comes, it is a scene of despair. You read the accounts of a battle and

the slaughter of thousands; you read of ships lost, and boats lost, and many fathers, husbands, sons, lost at sea. You think what a fearful thing is death coming in that way. And it is fearful, though you be thinking only of the individuals who have died. But when you think of the consequences of their deaths to their children, their parents, their friends, and try to sum up the sorrow, the privation, the neglect, the growth in sin instead of in grace, the spreading of the pestilence not only in them but in their families to the end of time, then it begins to dawn upon the mind, what a lamentable thing death is. And death itself is but a consequence. The fountain-head and spring of all this misery, temporal and eternal is sin; for it is sin that, when it is finished, bringeth forth death. It is not the doing of a power which men could neither shun nor resist. It is the doing of men themselves, the doing of their stubborn perverse wills that refused to be persuaded to better things. And as men are born now, heirs of a corrupt nature with all its tendencies poisoned by sin, this is the end, these are the results, which infallibly follow when the natural inclinations are followed without restraint. And such

means, we have been brought to value His merciful advent to save, and been led to try the truth of the words more than once repeated in Holy Scripture, that "they that put their trust in the Lord shall never be put to confusion."

SERMON IV.

The Consequences of Sin.—Condemnation.

Then shall He say unto them on His left hand, Depart from Me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels. Matthew xxv, 41.

LOOKING back at the subjects which have occupied our attention for the last three Sundays, we see that we have followed the consequences of sin through this life to the hour of death. We have seen it poison all the well-springs of human happiness that are to be found by the way-side through our pilgrimage here. We have seen it corrupt and sicken the whole spiritual nature of man, spreading gradually but surely through the individual's nature, and through the race at large. And we have on Sunday last contemplated these consequences as they manifest themselves in the hour of death and especially in the misery and despair which overwhelm the obstinate sinner when the time of dissolution is come.

We have seen how awful these consequences are. The contemplation of them cannot but have been beneficial to us. For we are far too prone to think lightly of sin. We are subjected to the effect of constant association with it. Our souls live in an atmosphere loaded with its foul taint. This produces the same effect upon the soul, as living in the midst of foul air does upon the body. In such circumstances the energies of the body are impaired ; the perceptions are blunted ; and although at first the impurity of the air makes it offensive, this feeling soon wears off, and the senses no longer feel any disgust. It is only when men go out to the pure air for a time, and enter again, that they perceive the unpleasantness and the danger of the atmosphere in which they have been contentedly and ignorantly living. And when the soul is placed in the midst of impure surroundings,—in an atmosphere of sin,—at first the sin is distinctly offensive to it. But it is the consequence of remaining in such an atmosphere, that the spiritual perceptions become dull, and are gradually stupefied ; so that what was offensive at first, ere long ceases to be so, and in the end becomes positively agreeable. Men

will deny the sinfulness of much of their surroundings,—much that constitutes the atmosphere in which their souls breathe. Thoughts will continually pass through them, and principles continually actuate them, which they would once have felt to be fatal to purity, to happiness, and to hope ; and they will fail to perceive it,—they will even deny it. The only thing which will convince them of their danger is to lead them for a space into a purer atmosphere, and then they will learn how dangerously they have been deceived.

This is what we have been trying to do for the last three Sundays. We must now be beginning to realize, more fully perhaps than we have been wont, the exceeding danger of sin. We must be beginning to see, that if it pursues men through life and in the hour of death with so fearful a scourge, it is a thing to be feared,—it is a thing to be shunned with every energy of our nature. We must be beginning to see that if we value life, happiness, or hope, we must shun the atmosphere of sin, as we would the breath of a pestilence.

But if we have seen a good many of the *evil effects* of sin, we have not seen them all.

For it not only pursues man through life, and agonizes him in the hour of death, but it pursues him even beyond the grave ; and the accumulated sum of keenest suffering which it inflicts before the moment of dissolution, is as nothing to the eternity of woe which it inflicts thereafter. Even if only the miseries which flow from sin in this life were to be repeated, the thought would be enough to make men wretched. When the heathen blindly groping after some idea of the future state, feared that it might be so, the thought was a terror to him.

Did the kind friend who closed our eyes
Speak peace to us in vain ?
Is there no peace ? And have we died
To live and weep again ?

How much more fearful must be the thought, which is no imagination but a certain truth, that the misery which sin inflicts in this life, is absolutely nothing, compared to that which surely follows it hereafter !

If, when St. Paul reasoned of righteousness, temperance, and judgment to come, Felix trembled, there must be thoughts roused in our minds by the consideration of the subject of the text, which cannot but make us serious.

For it brings before us the infallible consequence of sin, in CONDEMNATION by the All-seeing, the Just, the Almighty Judge. And until we have striven to realize this, we have not taken a complete view of all that springs from sin against God.

It is a subject which is frequently brought before us by Holy Scripture. It is to be found there oftener, it is to be feared, than in our thoughts. We are provided with the materials for forming some conception of that dread event. Of course it is described in earthly imagery, because it could not in any other way be placed before our minds. And we know that if this is sufficient to place before us a conception which must fill us with fear and awe, it falls far short of what the reality will be. Let us bring together what Scripture says on the subject, so as to see the more striking points of the scene.

"I beheld," says St. John, "and lo there was a great earthquake; and the sun became black as sackcloth of hair, and the moon became as blood; and the stars of heaven fell to the earth even as a fig-tree casteth her untimely figs, when she is shaken of a mighty wind. And

the heaven departed as a scroll when it is rolled together ; and every mountain and island were moved out of their places. And the kings of the earth, and the great men, and the rich men, and the captains and the mighty men, and every bondman, and every freeman, hid themselves in the dens, and in the rocks of the mountains, and said unto the mountains and rocks, fall on us, and hide us from the face of Him that sitteth on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb ; for the great day of His wrath is come ; and who shall be able to stand ?”* “And I saw a great white throne, and Him that sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away ; and there was found no place for them. And I saw the dead, small and great, stand before God ; and the books were opened ; and another book was opened, which is the book of life ; and the dead were judged out of those things which were written in the books, according to their works. And the sea gave up the dead which were in it ; and death and hell delivered up the dead which were in them ; and they were judged every man according to their works.”† And He who will on that day

*Rev. vi, 12—17. †Rev. xx, 11—13.

sit on the great white throne, has Himself given us a description of how He will then judge men. "When the Son of Man shall come in His glory, with all His holy angels with Him, then shall He sit on the throne of His glory; and before Him shall be gathered all nations; and He shall separate them from one another, as a shepherd divideth his sheep from the goats: and He shall set the sheep on His right hand and the goats on the left. Then shall the King say unto them on His right hand, Come ye blessed children of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the beginning of the world:—for I was an hungred, and ye gave Me meat, I was thirsty, and ye gave Me drink; I was a stranger, and ye took Me in; naked, and ye clothed Me; I was sick, and ye visited Me; I was in prison, and ye came unto Me. Then shall the righteous answer Him, Lord when saw we Thee an hungred, and fed Thee? or thirsty, and gave Thee drink? When saw we Thee a stranger, and took Thee in? or naked, and clothed Thee? or when saw we Thee sick, and in prison, and came unto Thee? And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, inasmuch as ye have

done it unto one of the least of these My brethren, ye have done it unto Me. Then shall He say unto them on the left hand, Depart from Me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the Devil and his angels: for I was an hungred, and ye gave Me no meat; I was thirsty, and ye gave Me no drink; I was a stranger, and ye took Me not in; naked, and ye clothed Me not; sick, and in prison, and ye visited Me not.”*

“And many will say to Me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Thy Name, and in Thy Name have cast out Devils, and in Thy name done many wonderful works?”†

“They shall also answer Him saying, Lord when saw we Thee an hungred, or athirst, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not minister unto Thee? Then shall He answer them saying, Verily I say unto you, inasmuch as ye did it not unto one of the least of these ye did it not to Me.”‡ “I never knew you: depart from Me ye that work iniquity.”§

“And these shall go away into everlasting punishment.”|| “And the fearful, and the unbelieving, and the abominable, and murderers, and whoremongers, and sorcerers, and idolaters,

*Matt. xxv, 31—43. †Matt. vii, 22. ‡Matt. xxv, 44, 45.

§Matt. vii, 23. ||Matt. xxv, 46.

and all liars, shall have their part in the lake that burneth with fire and brimstone, which is the second death.”*

With such imposing surroundings will the “Son of Man come in the clouds of heaven,” amid the crash of the dissolving universe, and the sound of the trumpet which summons the dead from earth and sea to stand before the judgment throne. None of us will then be amissing. We may, like our first parents, hide ourselves from God now ; we may refuse to see Him,—forsake His protection,—put the thought of Him out of our minds. But we cannot hide ourselves then. We shall, every single individual of us, be there. We have the very deepest interest in the description given of that day. Then all men, and ourselves among them, will appear in their true characters. And according to their characters they will be divided into two classes. In one or the other of these two classes we shall ourselves stand. For the whole race of men will then be judged. Among those who have been outwardly members of the Church and of this congregation, there will be a separation made. Those who have in reality been followers

*Rev. xxi, 8.

of Christ, and they who have been so in profession and outward appearance only, will be for ever divided. Then the field will be reaped, and the tares will be separated from the wheat. Then the net will be drawn to the shore, and the good fishes will be separated from the bad. It will be an eternal separation, involving the eternal fate of the two classes.

It is a matter of the deepest concern then to each individual human being to know on what principle the separation will be made. The Judge Himself states the principle in the plainest words ;—"They that have done good shall go into life everlasting, and they that have done evil into everlasting fire." It is to be observed however that "they that have done evil" means "they that have neglected to do good." It is not deeds of active wickedness which they have committed, that are given as the ground of their condemnation, but simply that they did not do good. It is not enough that they did not take the food, the drink, the clothing, from Christ's, brethren ; but they ought to have given food, drink, clothing, to those who lacked. Men may call Christ "Lord, Lord ;" that is they may confess Him in words ;

but this good profession, which is no more than a profession, is not enough. Their words must agree with their profession. They must recognize Christ as Lord, their deeds must show that they really serve Him, and not serve themselves. There is one great principle lying at the bottom of the difference between the good and the bad which men do. There are many ways and forms in which sin manifests itself outwardly. But only one principle lies at the root of all. The many motives on which sin may be committed may all be classed under one head. In whatever way or other they all show that self is the object which they serve. The advantage of the enjoyment of self, the glorification of self, these are the objects which they pursue. Even when the action itself is vitiated by being done for this selfish motive. When alms are about to be given, the trumpet is sounded, that self may be glorified by the world's applause of the giver's generosity. And the reward which is sought is obtained, and nothing more. When prayer is about to be made, it is at the door of the streets, that self may be exalted and righteous in the eyes of men. And t

of men accordingly is all that is obtained. And thus the touchstone which tries a man is the question, whether Christ or self is the object of service. He that puts self before Christ is guilty of sin. His guiding principle is the very principle of sin ; it is the neglecting or slighting of Christ. Our Lord Himself expresses this in another form when He says, " He that will save his life shall lose it ;" that is, he that acts on the principle of making self the supreme object of regard, shall end in self-destruction through sin. This then is the principle on which men will be separated at the day of judgment. They that have made God and Christ the supreme objects of their love and service, will be placed on one side ; and on the other, all who have made self,—the desires and pleasures of self,—the final cause of all thought and exertion.

If a man then would form some conception of how he appears in the eye of the great Judge, this is the all-sufficient principle by which he must test himself. The examination must be of exceeding strictness. For self, which has deceived so often, will deceive even in this. Our Lord reveals the alarming fact, that in that

great day the wicked will turn out to have entirely mistaken their own position. Those really following after self, will be seen to have been all the while deceiving themselves into the belief, that they were acting in Christ's Name, and working miracles against evil by its power. "Lord, Lord," they will say, "have we not prophesied in Thy Name, and in Thy Name cast out devils, and in Thy Name done many wonderful works?" They will have been quite satisfied as to their condition before God. They will have had the assurance of salvation, because they thought they were acting in Christ's Name; whereas they were in reality all the while acting in the service of self,—following the whims of self in belief, and propagating them in their teaching. And when charged with neglect of Christ, they will be equally surprised. They had acquitted themselves of any such neglect. "Lord, when saw we Thee an hungred, or athirst, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not minister unto Thee?" The one characteristic of them will be that they will be self-deceived. For the Judge will say unto them, "Inasmuch as ye did it not unto one of the least of these, ye did it not to Me." "I

never knew you : Depart from Me ye that work iniquity."

Let us strive to realize the misery of that position in which sin has placed these wretched beings. Then their eyes will be opened to their true position, and they will see the abyss of destruction yawning before them. "In that day," says Isaiah, "shall the deaf hear the words of the book, and the blind shall see out of obscurity." They will sink under a sense of deception : "an horrible dread will overwhelm them." Their hearts, when they recover the first shock will boil up with anger against the deceiver. But when they look about for that deceiver, they find that it is self. Then the undying worm of remorse will begin to gnaw at their hearts. Then there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. They will be pierced to the inmost depths of their nature by an overwhelming sense of the all-penetrating knowledge, and infinite power of the Judge before whom they stand, and an inconceivable dread will strike through their hearts. They will cry to the mountains "Fall on us, and hide us from the face of Him that sitteth on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb." It will be no

causeless fear, for the sentence which the Lamb will then pronounce, will be one, the anguish of which we cannot in this life fully realize.

"He will say unto them on His left hand, Depart from Me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the Devil and his angels." "This is the second death" says St. John. It is not a dismissal out of existence, for a whole eternity will be before them. It is not a deprivation of consciousness, for they will be conscious to all eternity of the keenest agony. We cannot realize to the full what it is. But this much we can understand from what Scripture says about it. It is eternal exclusion from the presence of God, and from all communion with that which is good, and from all knowledge that can comfort. This much is implied in the words "Depart from Me." It is also certain that the sentence implies complete negation of divine grace. No good thought, no elevated desire, no righteous impulse, no happy feeling, will ever visit the heart again. On the contrary, every evil passion, every foul desire, every recurring temptation, will gather to rack the victim. No ray of gladdening light, no happy reminiscence of noble powers and grand

opportunities, no glimpse of the glory that is inseparable from God, will ever again be possible. When the sentence is pronounced, it is the death-knell of hope. It is the beginning of an eternity of despair. The position of the condemned sinner is like that of a man in a burning house with no hope of escape. He tries the stair-case, but it is in a blaze ; he thinks of the window, but it too is closed by the roaring flames. There is none to help, and hope is gone. And the sinner at the last cannot comfort himself that soon all will be over, for that it will never be. There will be no end to his anguish. And the worm that dieth not, the fire that is not quenched, are but feeble earthly comparisons, to indicate in some measure what our minds cannot fully realize.

Such is the end to which sin brings human beings. Devotion to self, ends in self-destruction. And this is the end to which our nature would invariably come, if left to itself. God only knows how many of us will through His mercy in Christ escape. But without Christ *none* of us could escape. And as it is, many are called, but few chosen. Many receive privileges,—the knowledge of salvation through Christ, and the

means of grace,—but few so use them that they will be found at the last on the Judge's right hand. Think of the vast multitudes, every individual of which will thus suffer. Try, if it be possible, to conceive the vast sum of all this misery. And remember it all comes of sin. It all comes of that evil principle of serving self, resting in self, and neglecting Christ.

All men are heirs of a nature which is penetrated through and through with this evil principle. And if left to ourselves, we should all stand on the Judge's left hand. We could not save ourselves. Let us try to realize what it would be in our own individual cases. Think of the anguish we feel in this world at parting from all we love. And try to realize the fact, that the hour of judgment and condemnation is the hour of separation for all eternity from everything that can be loved, or that can give happiness. It is the hour of exclusion for ever from God and goodness. There is no more hope. The unrest which sin has caused in this life, is nothing to the unrest which begins for the wicked at that dread sentence. The corruption which it produces in us here, is nothing to the *complete* inversion of every good thing in our

nature which that sentence will bring. The miseries of the sinner's death-bed, are nothing compared with the anguish of the state which is called the second death.

There is only one Saviour from all this, and it is His coming which we now call to mind. He is to us what the fire-escape is to the man suffocating in the burning house ; what the life-boat is to the drowning sailor. Each individual among us is under the curse of sin ; and the miseries that flow from it we have been striving to realize. If we have thus learnt what a fatal thing it is, and how much to be feared and hated, we shall value the Saviour. If we fear the miseries of eternal loss, we shall flee to the only stronghold. If we dread the sentence "Depart from Me,"—if we fear exclusion from His face at last,—we shall seek His face now. When the message is proclaimed, "I looked and there was none to help, and I wondered that there was none to uphold : therefore Mine own arm brought salvation," then the love of those for whom that salvation was wrought will go forth to the Saviour. They will not hesitate, or hear with unconcern. They will say, "I am Thine : O save me." And they will join their

voices to those of the Church universal, which unites in one great thanksgiving for the Redeemer's birth. They will partake of the joy of such a thanksgiving now, which will be a foretaste of that joy around the throne of God, when the "great multitude which no man can number, of all nations, and kindreds, and peoples, and tongues, stand before the throne, and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, and palms in their hands ; and cry with a loud voice, saying, Salvation to our God that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb."

SERMON V.

The Prey of the Terrible Delivered.

Thus saith the Lord, even the captives of the mighty shall be taken away, and the prey of the terrible shall be delivered, for I will contend with him that contendeth with thee, and I will save thy children. . . . And all flesh shall know that I the Lord am thy Saviour and thy Redeemer, the Mighty One of Jacob. Isaiah xlix, 25, 26.

THESE words would strike us forcibly at any time. But they strike a peculiarly sympathetic chord in all hearts to-day, when we meet to commemorate, with thanksgiving to the Father of Mercies, the birth of Him by whom this long-promised deliverance was at length triumphantly effected.

We see here a most powerful description of the condition to which man was brought by sin. He is described as having been attacked by a mighty and terrible foe, and as having been worsted in the encounter. The enemy has been

too strong for him, and now the consequences of defeat darken the future. He is the captive of the mighty; the bondman of one whose power makes deliverance appear hopeless. He is no longer his own master. He has become the prey of one, whose character makes that condition terrible. The prospect is one to fill the strongest heart with fear.

We have been trying to realize this during the season of Advent. We have been trying to bring home more forcibly to our minds what a wellspring of misery and suffering sin is, how heartily it is to be feared and hated, both for its immediate results now, and its prospective results in the world to come. We have seen that it is followed immediately by shame and fear; by the loss of self-respect, and weakness in the hour of temptation: by the partial loss of freedom in consequence of the bias which the will receives in the direction of evil. We have seen that the sinner is at once started on a downward course, which leads him by many and devious paths, but brings him always in the end to the gates of hell. We have seen him living under a continual dread; feeling his guilt in the presence of God; overwhelmingly conscious of

the constant piercing gaze of His all-seeing eye, and of His perfect holiness, justice, and power. We have seen sin fill his life with uneasiness and unrest, down to its latest hour ; driving him as the slave of that remorseless master by whom he has been taken captive, his whole life labour and sorrow, and his reward mockery.

We have seen his whole nature gradually corrupted by sin ; the disease spreading till every good thing in him is debased, every good principle inverted, the whole nature divided against itself, and all strength taken out of it. We have seen first the thoughts tainted ; then the purity of the aims and desires defiled ; then shame gradually lost, and finally the manifestation of this state of things, in unclean language, and unholy action. And we have beheld the evil spreading from one individual to another, till the mass of corruption in the human race at large, was positively frightful to contemplate.

We looked also upon the effects of sin in death. We saw how to all human beings death is accompanied by pain and sorrow, and the laceration of the best feelings of humanity in parting from all we love on earth ; and how in the case of the careless sinner it is accompanied by

remorse at the thought of opportunities wantonly cast away, mercies despised, and warnings unheeded ; by an overwhelming sense of guilt when the eye is turned to the past, and fear and despair, when it is turned to the future.

And we have seen the climax of the consequences of sin in the day of judgment, when in the midst of surroundings of the most awe-inspiring magnificence, the sentence is pronounced which consigns the condemned to everlasting companionship with that evil which they have chosen. We have beheld them awakening to a sense of their true position. We have seen the anguish and remorse of the self-deceived, the terror with which they see the piercing knowledge, the rigorous justice and the infinite power of the Judge. We have seen the awfulness of that to which they are condemned ; the misery of knowing that they must exist and suffer for ever ; the suffering involved in the complete impossibility in future of any good thought, any holy desire, any happy consciousness of right endeavour, and the giving up of the nature to be the sport of every evil passion, debased desire, and diabolical impulse. We have seen the misery of eternal isolation from

all that is good and from all that could yield happiness. And we have seen the summation of all their misery in the necessary abandonment of all hope, and the going under the dark shadow of eternal despair.

We also saw that this was a state of things necessarily following from sin. Man could not escape by his own power exerted to the utmost. He had been able to set the avalanche rolling, but to stop it in its career of destruction was beyond his power. And every individual among us was involved in the consequent ruin. It was not only the specially wicked who were placed in this position, but even the best of us, who are so prone from the elevation of self-esteem to look down with so much contempt on the notorious sinner. We were all, without exception, in the condemnation ; and without help from beyond ourselves,—without help from above,—all these fearful consequences of sin must inevitably have fallen upon us. Try to realize what it would be to be in the grip of so fearful a fate ; and you will feel how true is the description here given by the prophet, of sinful man, that he is “ the captive of the mighty,”—“ the prey of the terrible.”

Scripture uses many expressions to show the misery of the position. Men are represented as humiliated and enslaved, overwhelmed with sorrow, and broken in heart. They are represented as sitting in darkness and the shadow of death.

But if we are struck by the power and force of the prophet's description of the position in which sin placed us all, there is another point which is no less striking. It is impossible not to be struck with the tender love towards fallen man, on the part of the Redeemer; the calm resolve to deliver them; the consciousness of abundant power, and the presage of triumph, which breathe throughout the passage. "Thus saith the Lord, even the captives of the mighty shall be taken away, and the prey of the terrible shall be delivered; for I will contend with him that contendeth with thee, and I will save thy children. . . . And all flesh shall know that I the Lord am thy Saviour and thy Redeemer, the Mighty One of Jacob."

There is abundant reason that not only should the words breathe a triumphant spirit, but that we should read in them the assurance of deliverance. For the Deliverer is Divine.

He is the Mighty One of Israel, the mighty descendant of Jacob. But He is more than man, the descendant of Israel. He is the Lord Jehovah :—the possessor of the divine nature, co-equal with the Father from all eternity. It is none other than the eternal Son, the brightness of the Father's glory, and the express image of His Person, who stands forth as the champion of the captives. "The word was made flesh," says St. John, "and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth." He takes the nature of man, that He may stand forth as the Deliverer of man. In that nature which fell in Adam, He comes to overthrow the tempter of Adam. In that nature which sinned in Adam and became subject to sin and death, He comes to suffer death "for every man." Observe, it is not for all men in a body, but for every man individually. And if each individual among us was present to the Saviour's knowledge when He hung on the cross, not only the whole race of captive sinners, but every individual sinner must have been present to His mind when He resolved on working their deliverance, and when He took our human nature

for that purpose. And thus He came with a distinct purpose and design of being the Saviour of each individual here present. That man will be lost, will be the consequence, not of a partial purpose on the part of the Saviour, but of the perverse will of the sinner. For Redeemer's love is all embracing, and His power without limit. "He is able to save to the uttermost." He is indeed, as we see Him in the manger at Bethlehem, a little child. He takes a form which is the very emblem of helplessness and dependence. But even then there are wanting signs of His power to deliver. All heaven is moved at His birth. It is a subject rejoicing to the angels of God, and they come to communicate the cause of their rejoicing to men, who have, of all created beings, the most cause to rejoice.

The helmed Cherubim
And sworded Seraphim
Are seen in glittering ranks with wings displayed
Harping in loud and solemn choir
 . . . to heaven's new-born heir.

And as He grows up, there are seen in His demeanour, His words, and His actions signs of His purpose and His power to save.

proclaims Himself as the Deliverer from all the evil consequences of sin,—from the guilt contracted in the past, from its power over us in the present, and from its punishment in the future. If sin subjects man to continual unrest, and makes him live under a feeling of a want which no gratification of his appetites will satisfy, Jesus says, “Come unto Me all ye that labour, and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn of Me, for I am meek and lowly in heart, and ye shall find rest unto your souls.” Again and again He proclaims Himself as the Being who can satisfy the cravings of humanity, and afford spiritual refreshment and repose. “If any man thirst, let him come unto Me, and drink.” “I am the bread of life.” “If thou knewest the gift of God, and who it is that saith to thee, Give Me to drink, thou wouldest have asked of Him, and He would have given thee living water.” If sin hides the face of God from man, as a cloud darkens the sun, He proclaims, “I am the light of the world; he that followeth Me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life.” If “sin when it is finished bringeth forth death” to men, He proclaims, “I

am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly." And if sin brings upon men condemnation in the day of judgment, He says, "Whosoever liveth and believeth in Me shall not die eternally."

And while He thus proclaimed Himself as the great Deliverer, His deeds showed that He had power to make good His words. All nature submitted to Him. The tempestuous sea became calm at His word, crouching beneath His eye like a dog beneath the eye of his master. The water becomes wine at His mere wish ; the fig tree withers at His word. Diseases relinquish their victims ; the powers of evil submit to Him without a struggle, acknowledging His power ; even death yields its prey at His command. The dead comes alive from the grave when He bids him. He overthrows death completely, when He Himself comes from the grave, and many of the saints which slept arise, and appear to many. Everywhere the great Deliverer is triumphant. Yea, even in the hour of deepest humiliation on the cross, He is triumphant. For it is as there lifted up, that He draws all men to Him, by the fact that His death satisfies that deepest craving of humanity for an atone-

ment, a reconciliation between men and God. He reigns, He conquers from the cross. "Look unto Me," He says, "and be ye saved, all ye ends of the earth." "O Israel, thou hast destroyed thyself, but in Me is thy help." Thus everywhere is the Saviour triumphant, and the promise of the text is made good. "Thus saith the Lord, even the captives of the Mighty shall be taken away, and the prey of the terrible shall be delivered; for I will contend with him that contendeth with thee, and I will save thy children."

But it is not only in the personal work of the Deliverer that His might is shown, but in the triumph of Christian souls through Him. It is not merely a statement and a promise of Scripture, but a fact of experience, that through the Son of God made man, of whose birth at Bethlehem we read to-day, the soul of the believer is delivered from the guilt, the power, and the consequences of sin.

Poverty, sickness, suffering, toil, sorrow, desolation,—these are found in the train of sin, and they are worthy of it. They are no despicable enemies. Suffering humanity acknowledges their power. The human heart in-

stinctively fears them. But the Mighty Child which was born in Bethlehem, has conquered this giant foe. In the midst of the grinding of poverty, the humble Christian can indulge in a triumphant joy, when he thinks of a "treasure in heaven that faileth not, where no thief approacheth, neither moth corrupteth," laid up there through Him who was born in the stable at Bethlehem. Overwhelmed with bodily sickness and pain, the Christian soul is still triumphant, for his sufferings point him forward to the land opened by the Saviour, where such things are no more. They are but the King's Messengers, and he rejoices at their call. Desolation,—there is no such thing for him, for he says ever, "Thou art with me, Thy rod and Thy staff comfort me." Even in the furnace of affliction, though it be heated seven times more than it is wont to be heated, still he has no hurt, for there is One with him "whose form is like the Son of God." Truly "the captive of the mighty is taken away, and the prey of the terrible is delivered."

When the Christian soul stands beset in the hour of temptation, and allurements fascinate all his senses, and he is tempted to yield, then

the hand that was pierced for him is stretched forth to help : he remembers the incorruptible crown of righteousness ; in the might of the Saviour's Spirit he striveth for the mastery, and is more than conqueror through Him that loved him. And even when in the struggle of battle he has stumbled and fallen, his leader is at hand ; in penitence and strong faith he rises again to endure to the end. And thus in the very hour when the enemy thought he had him, the prey of the terrible is again delivered, through the Mighty One of Israel.


But the greatest triumph of the Christian soul is in that hour when the enemy closes for the decisive struggle. Here it is the same from the king to the beggar. That struggle must be gone through by all, and only one Mighty Name can then shield and strengthen. Then the powers of nature sink in utter prostration : the feeling that is uppermost, is that of the utter powerlessness and feebleness of man. Then when mind and body are oppressed with exhaustion, and the enemy gathers for the assault with his strongest reserve, one would think the foe would find his opportunity. But look at the death-bed of him who has believed

in the Saviour and walked in His footsteps. "Even in the valley of the shadow of death," he says, "I will fear no evil ; for Thou art with me ; Thy rod and Thy staff comfort me." He has trusted his Saviour through affliction, trial, sorrow, and bereavement ; he will not give up trusting Him now. He has held fast by Him through temptation ; he will cling to Him still. He has held His guiding hand in all his wanderings ; he will hold that strong and faithful hand through yet one more step, dark though it be, and he cannot see before him. And so in calm, loving trust in the Saviour, he retains his hope, unshaken even in the hour of death. Death is indeed mighty and terrible to the children of Adam ; but here "the captive of the mighty is taken away, and the prey of the terrible delivered."

And think of yet another scene, when the dead, small and great, stand before the throne of God and of the Lamb, and a vast multitude separated from the rest stand on the Judge's right hand. The voice of the Judge pronounces the sentence which brings to them eternal joy, and happiness which "eye hath not seen nor ear heard, nor heart of man conceived." Hence-

forth they are to rejoice in the immediate and unclouded presence of Him in whose presence is the fulness of joy. His praises are to be the theme of the songs which they are to sing for ever to the glory of the Lamb. They were once all the captives of sin, the prey of Satan and death. But assuredly the promise of the text has been fulfilled ;—"The captives of the mighty have been taken away, and the prey of the terrible delivered."

And the event which we call to mind this day is the coming of the Deliverer. Who does not, feeling his need, desire that he may be thus delivered ? Then is there not a cause why we should rejoice and praise God for His unspeakable gift of an Almighty Deliverer ? Is there not a cause why we should rejoice and praise God for our blessed Redeemer's birth ? That Saviour is loving ; He is mighty. Will ye not trust in Him, love Him, follow Him,—following His guidance in every perplexity, trusting to His protection in every danger ? That is the way to show that you value Him. That will make the sweetest music in the ear of God. Without that all outward signs of joy are hypocritical abominations to Him. Be His



therefore for ever ; your own no more. Make your whole future lives a showing forth of the triumphs of the Saviour, in your victory through Him over temptation, trial, sorrow and death ; in making every act a surrender of self to Him, a reasonable sacrifice. And then at last through Him you will be no longer the prey of the terrible, but will join in that great thanksgiving when "every creature which is in heaven and on the earth, and under the earth, and such as are in the sea, and all that are in them, say, Blessing, and honour, and glory, and power, be unto Him that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb for ever and ever."

SERMON VI.

Let it alone this year also.

Lord, let it alone this year also till I shall dig about it, and dung it ; and if it bear fruit, well ; and if not, then after that thou shalt cut it down. Luke xiii, 8, 9.

THESE words are suggestive of many solemn reflections at the beginning of another year. "Let it alone this year also." Give one last opportunity ; one final warning. The words are particularly suggestive, because with the last of the old year, we pass as it were another milestone in the journey of life. The passing of one more stage can scarcely take place without our thoughts almost involuntarily turning back to the past, and looking forward to the future. The passing of a milestone on the road at once suggests the comparison between what we have already accomplished of our journey, and what is yet to be done. We think of what proportion of the road is behind us, and what

proportion before. And we involuntarily compare the toils and difficulties and dangers past, with those yet to come. And thus when the passing from the old year to the new reminds us thus of our journey through life, the thoughts naturally run forward to anticipate the end, which we have approached so much nearer. And the thought that our journey is our time of probation, rises up before us. We know that whether the end be near or far off, what that end will be will depend upon how we have conducted ourselves during our journey. For though death comes alike to all, and ends the pilgrimage ; yet death, though the end of man's existence in time, is the beginning of his existence in eternity. That eternity has to be spent in one or other of two ways. We come at the end of our journey to perfect joy or unutterable misery. And whichever it is, there is no end to it. And we know that the answer to the question whether it is to be joy or sorrow, depends on what we have done here. And thus the character which the future will bear to us depends on the past.

Here we have a new light thrown on the past. It rises up before us, not in the light of

the joys or sorrows, the labours or the sufferings which it has brought us, but as it bears upon our condition in eternity. And we find ourselves balancing the question, whether we have been journeying towards happiness or misery, towards heaven or hell.

And if such thoughts are naturally called up in our minds by the passing away of the old year, then is that season a messenger to our spirits from the Most High. And the message which it brings, and which it delivers to all, whether they will hear it or not, is a most significant one. It is a message to consider what fruit we have been bringing forth in times past, and what return we have to make to the Lord of the vineyard. It is nothing short of a demand on His behalf for the fruit which is His due. It is because we are thus in the same situation as the fig-tree in the parable, and because we are so emphatically reminded of the fact at this time, that the words of the text seem to take a special hold of us now, and to find a special opening in our hearts.

What then is the lesson of the parable? We find it clearly laid down that the fruit of the fig-tree is the just requirement of the Lord

of the vineyard. The tree has no right to occupy space, and draw the sap from the soil, and take up the time, and occupy the labour of the dresser of the vineyard, if it is only a barren tree, and produces no return. It is placed there, and allowed to remain there, solely for the purpose of bringing forth fruit for its owner's use. And if it does not do so, it is a useless cumberer of the ground, fit for nothing but to be cut down and cast into the fire. It is because of this that the Lord of the vineyard comes demanding the fruit. The fact that it is refused one year, does not take away what we may call the responsibility of the tree. The Lord of the vineyard continues to demand fruit. It is true he has great patience. He is sent away empty three years. He endures it all that time. But his patience is exhausted at last. The fig-tree's time of probation is over. The owner says to the dresser of his vineyard, "Behold these three years I come seeking fruit on this fig-tree, and find none ; cut it down ; why cumbereth it the ground ?"

This is the decree of justice, after long patience. And our Lord Himself on another occasion emphasized the lesson of this part of

the parable, by withering with His curse the fig-tree which showed abundant profession of luxuriant leaves, but no fruit. This fig-tree is in great danger ; and its day would be over but for the intercession of the dresser of the vineyard. " Lord " he pleads, " let it alone this year also, till I shall dig about it and dung it ; and if it bear fruit, well ; and if not, then after that thou shalt cut it down."

We have seen that the new year by reminding us of the end to which we are hastening, makes the future throw a solemn light on our conduct in the past, and our attitude in the present. It suggests searchings of heart as to what the future will be in consequence of the past. What sort of view does this open up to us ? I do not mean that we should ask, What view does it open to the Church to which we belong ? How does it affect it as a body ? This is indeed a serious and important question. But I mean that each of us should consider, how it affects him as an individual.

Year after year we have received, all our lives long, blessings innumerable from the hand of God. We have been allowed to retain our health, and all our faculties of mind and body.

We are able to think : we are able to act. We have the knowledge of the Gospel of Jesus Christ poured upon our minds. We have heard proclaimed out of God's own Word the message of salvation through Him. We have been taught the truth about our own souls ; about their natural condition before God, and the way in which that condition may be improved. We know by experience our proneness to sin, our weakness in the hour of temptation, our natural disinclination to think the things that belong to our peace. And the Word of God enables us to understand this state of matters, and appreciate it more justly. It teaches us how we may escape from the guilt of past sin, from the power of present temptation, and from condemnation in the day of judgment. We are taught how God's pardoning, helping, guiding grace may be obtained. We live in the midst of the means of grace. We have their claims and their offers set justly before us, according to the truth of God's Holy Word. We have everything that could be required to help us to be fruitful. We have the opportunities which life, health, and our positions in life give us. And all this we have received at the hands of

God. Every single one of these mercies came from Him, and the mere reception of it was a call from Him to use it in His service. This is how the past looks, when we think of what has been done in it on God's side.

How does what *we* have done appear? Let every individual look calmly back, and try dispassionately and justly to consider this question. Try to think how it appears in the eye of the all-seeing God.

Has He not looked down upon creatures habitually forgetting Him during a great part of their lives? Has He not seen us regularly putting past our duties to Him, with just as little pains expended upon them as we possibly could? Has He not seen us planning and struggling to astonish men with our cleverness, and persuading ourselves that we have done actions pleasing to Him, when in the doing of them we never thought of Him at all. Has He not seen us negligent, or cold, or careless in our private devotions before Him, often omitting family worship altogether? Has He not seen us neglecting His Holy Word, indeed, so careless about it, that were it not for certain customs, we would seldom look into it? And what shall

we say about other means of grace ? How have we treated the Table of the Lord ? Have we been living so carelessly, that to come to it would appear a desecration ? And have we not in consequence been very seldom seen there in devout faith ? Have we treated that sacred rite as a mere form, concentrating our thought upon the outward part, and never lifting up our hearts, as the service bids us, to where our Blessed Saviour pleads for us by the memory of His cross and passion before the mercy seat above ? And in consequence have we gone away none the better for having been there ? Have we gone without the blessing, because we came careless of it ? Has not God seen all this ? Has He not watched us living apart from Him, with no recollection of Him, no desire to please Him ? Has He not seen us on the contrary living for self,—using all our faculties not for Him or for His glory, but for the sole purpose of gratifying our own inclinations and passions ?

And all this time He has been coming seeking fruit. One year of the world's history He came by Moses, another year by the Prophets, a third year by His beloved Son. He has made a thrice repeated demand for fruit. He has

demanding it of us once, by the natural law of conscience written within us ; a second time, by the voice of His written law in His Holy Word ; a third time by the inward promptings of divine grace, moving us to bring forth fruit unto holiness. To us all He has come with the demand for fruit once in childhood, by the early religious teachings of the church. To many He has come a second time in manhood and womanhood, by the full knowledge given to the mature mind, and the sense of individual responsibility. To many He has come a third time in old age, by the warnings of decaying strength and failing faculties. By all these means He has demanded fruit. He has sought it by all His gifts, by all His mercies, by all His warnings, by His Holy Word read and preached. And when we look back, and the spirit of our whole former life lies before our eye, do we not feel that when His eye rests upon that "prospect drear," the verdict of His justice will be, that fruit He has found none ? And, even ourselves being judges, would it be any wonder if the decree went forth, "cut it down ; why cumbereth it the ground ?"

Many forewarnings of this sentence have been given to us. We have heard them read

and preached out of God's Holy Word. We have heard His warnings in the death of friends and acquaintances. You have felt them, many of you, in the load of increasing years. You have become aware of His warning voice in the decay of your powers. In all these there were mild premonitions of the time, when, if still fruitless, we should hear the sentence, "cut it down."

This new year brings a new warning. How many that were here with us last year, have now passed away ! Is it not a mercy unspeakable that *we* are still spared to hear one warning more, and receive yet one other opportunity ? Do we not feel thankful from the bottom of our hearts, for the interceding voice of the Mediator, "Lord let it alone this year also, till I shall dig about it and dung it ; and if it bear fruit, well ; and if not, then after that thou shalt cut it down ?" "Let it alone this year also." One last opportunity is given to us. We know not how long may be granted to us. One alone can tell what places will be vacant when next year comes round. Some of us will certainly be wanting. We may not be let alone for the fourth part of this year. But thanks be to God we are here to-day, and the door of mercy is

still open ; the blessed invitations of the Saviour are still held out to us. We have still time to cease to be barren cumberers of the ground. The ability and the gifts of divine grace are still at our disposal. How shall we act ?

Let us bring the past back in review before the eye of our minds. Let us see where we went wrong ; whether we acted all through on false and unworthy principles ; whether we cherished and acted on low aims ; whether we forgot utterly that the highest, the only lawful object for man to cherish is the glory of God. Let us see where we fell short, and where the divine purpose in regard to us was thwarted and marred. And having thus taken a careful survey, let us as carefully plan how we shall amend ; how we shall shun occasions of falling ; how we shall brace and fortify ourselves against those temptations which we cannot shun ; how we shall thus be able to defeat our enemy. And let us plan how, in the coming year, we shall best carry out the purposes with regard to us which God has disclosed by the capacities, and powers, and opportunities, which He has given us. Let us think and pray over these plans, till we perfect them, and fix them deep

in our memories. And let us on our knees dedicate them to God, beseeching Him so to guide us in the carrying out of them, that we may always do that which shall be most pleasing to Him. Without Him we are not able to please Him ; by His help alone we can carry out these plans. Let this be a season of looking forward with wise fore-thought, a season of self-dedication, in which we offer to Him the reasonable sacrifice of our wills, our affections, our designs, and all our energies. Let us break with the evil of the past, and "reaching forth unto those things which are before, press toward the mark, for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus."

Again the voice as it were goes forth from God to the ministers of His Church,—“Speak unto the children of Israel, that they go forward.” They cannot see every step that is before them. We cannot tell them what will come to them with the coming year. But we *can* tell them that His guidance is faithful and sure, and that while they follow it, they cannot go astray. We *can* tell them that

The hosts of God encamp around
The dwellings of the just,

and that their defence is sure. We *can* tell them that the faithful, the loving, the mighty Saviour has led the way, and that whether their path be through tribulation or through wealth, through joy or through trial, or through the gates of death, He has gone before them ; and so long as they follow His footprints, they are in " the way of holiness," the way of salvation, and that if it leads through darkness, it ends in eternal day.

He has interceded " Lord let it alone this year also ;" He gives us yet one more chance. He condescends to be our leader still. Let us from this day arise and follow Him more closely, more humbly, more steadily, than before, that if we live till another year, we may look back over this with joy, and if the King's messengers come to summon us before then, we may die in the happy consciousness that the last call to to fruitfulness was not wasted.

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